



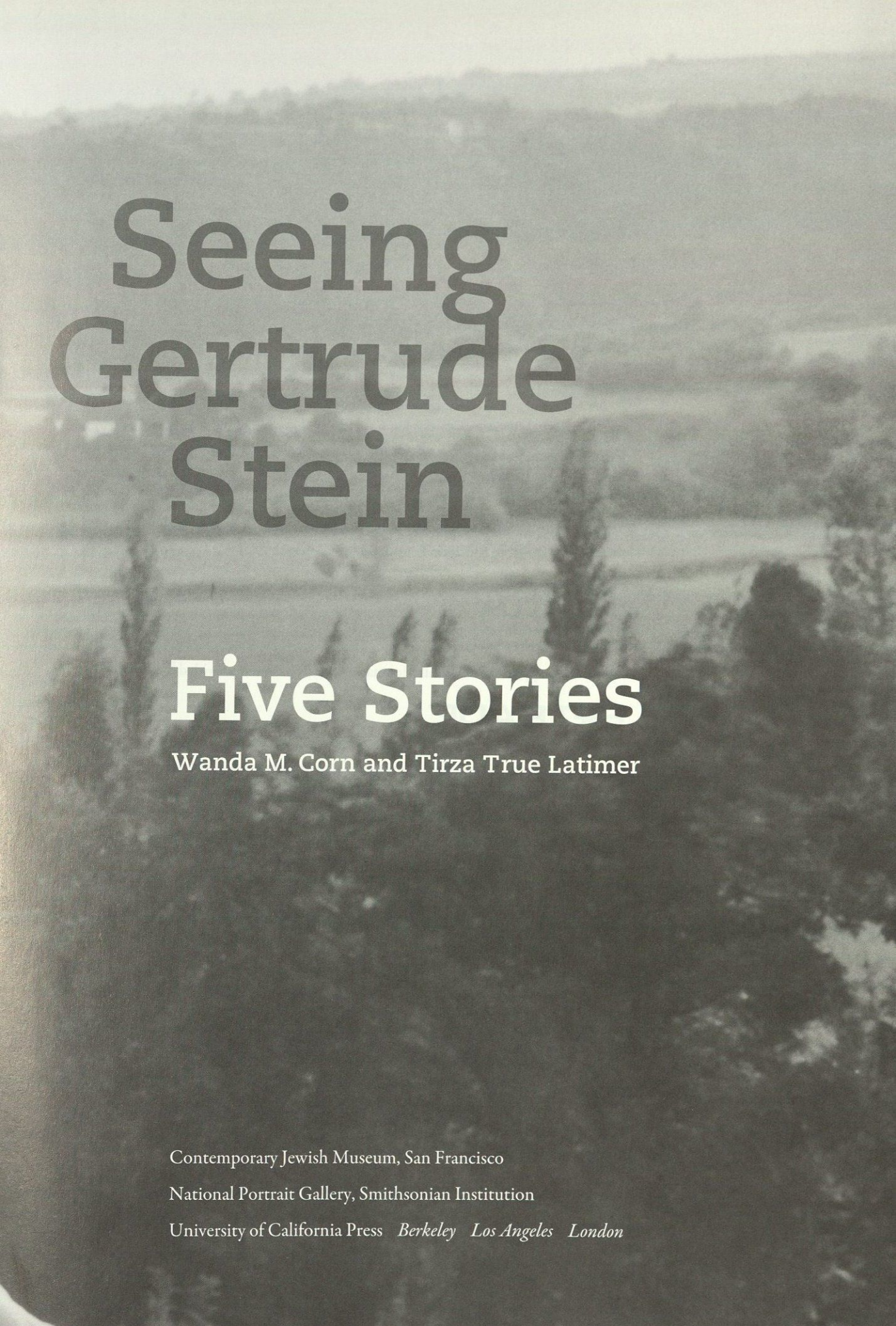
Seeing

Gertrude
Stein

FIVE STORIES

WANDA M. CORN AND TIRZA TRUE LATIMER





Seeing Gertrude Stein

Five Stories

Wanda M. Corn and Tirza True Latimer

Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

University of California Press *Berkeley Los Angeles London*

Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories has been jointly organized by the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco and the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

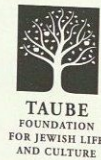
Major support for the exhibition, publication, and related programs has been received through a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Additional support for the exhibition national tour has been provided by E*TRADE.

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Generous support for the exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum has been provided by an Anonymous Donor, Osterweis Capital Management, the Jim Joseph Foundation, The Leavitt Family, Michael and Sue Steinberg, Randee and Joe Seiger, Joyce Linker, Siesel Maibach, and Dorothy R. Saxe. The Koret and Taube Foundations are the lead supporters of the 2010/11 exhibition season at the CJM.



Generous support for the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery has been provided by the Abraham & Virginia Weiss Charitable Trust, Amy and Marc Meadows; Ella Foshay; Catherine V. Dawson; and Vicki and Roger Sant.

Essential support for the publication has been provided by Fred Levin & Nancy Livingston, The Shenson Foundation, in memory of Ben and A. Jess Shenson.

for each other and everybody

Story 4: Celebrity Spin

Scouting the American

The "American Idol" Revolution

Performing Madonna

Was I Here?

George Strait

Alanis Morissette

John Mellencamp

Story 5: Legacies

Boyz n the City

Manly

Cher

Alanis Morissette

Legends

Pop Culture

Queen

Madonna

Notre-Dame

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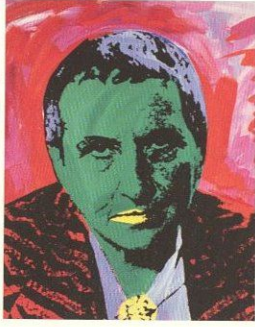
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Quoting Stein

Among the many possible forms of artistic response to Stein, one is quite literal: to quote Stein's writing. Visual artists, by quoting Stein or incorporating Steinian constructions in their work, pursue a strategy that was important to Stein herself. In *The Mother of Us All*, Stein appropriates whole passages of Susan B. Anthony's speeches, and in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she writes as if Toklas were telling the story. Today, visual artists who quote or refer to Stein carry on the dialogue between literature and art that she and her entourage began.

The sixtieth anniversary of *Tender Buttons*, which Stein wrote in 1912, prompted Donald Evans—whose visual oeuvre consists primarily of faux postage stamps—to make a commemorative gesture (fig. 220). *Tender Buttons*, first published in 1914 by another Donald Evans (the proprietor of a small press called Claire Marie), broke ground by translating the visual vernacular of cubism into words. In this work Stein juxtaposes evocations of mundane objects and events (an article of clothing, for instance, or a meal), snippets of dialogue, and free association in verbal compositions that critics often compare to cubist still lifes, portraits, and collages. Stein herself, in the essay titled "Portraits and Repetition" (1935), describes *Tender Buttons* as painting with words. Employing the cubists' formal devices of simultaneity and fragmentation, Stein evokes domestic spaces and objects that some have argued intentionally encode lesbian sexuality.¹

The homoeroticism of the book's wordplay has made it a cult classic in gay and lesbian communities. As early as 1929, Natalie Barney, in her tribute to Stein, winked at readers who shared her Sapphic orientation, protesting that she dare not translate the title *Tender Buttons* into French, "fearing a very Gallic interpretation" (*buton* being argot for "clitoris"). Evans, a gay man who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, counted the book among the few works that affirmed his own aesthetic and sexual transgressiveness. His *Tender Button* series of postage-stamp-size paintings in watercolor, pen, and ink, their edges perforated by a series of periods pounded out on an old typewriter, features quotations from Stein's book, inscribed in print so small that it is barely legible. A magnifying glass, however, brings Stein's work into focus, revealing lettering of a graven precision that also preserves the intimacy of handcraft. The literal and figurative mobility of Evans's art form is apt, given Stein's status as an expatriate and as the hub of a cosmopolitan circle of exceptionally peripatetic artists and writers. As the thousands of letters conserved at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library attest, Stein was an inveterate correspondent. The letters she wrote during her lifetime expanded and maintained the web of her world-

220. Donald Evans, *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein, 1972 (type of 1964). Watercolor on paper, 29.2 × 21.6 cm (11½ × 8½ in.).

“A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm.”

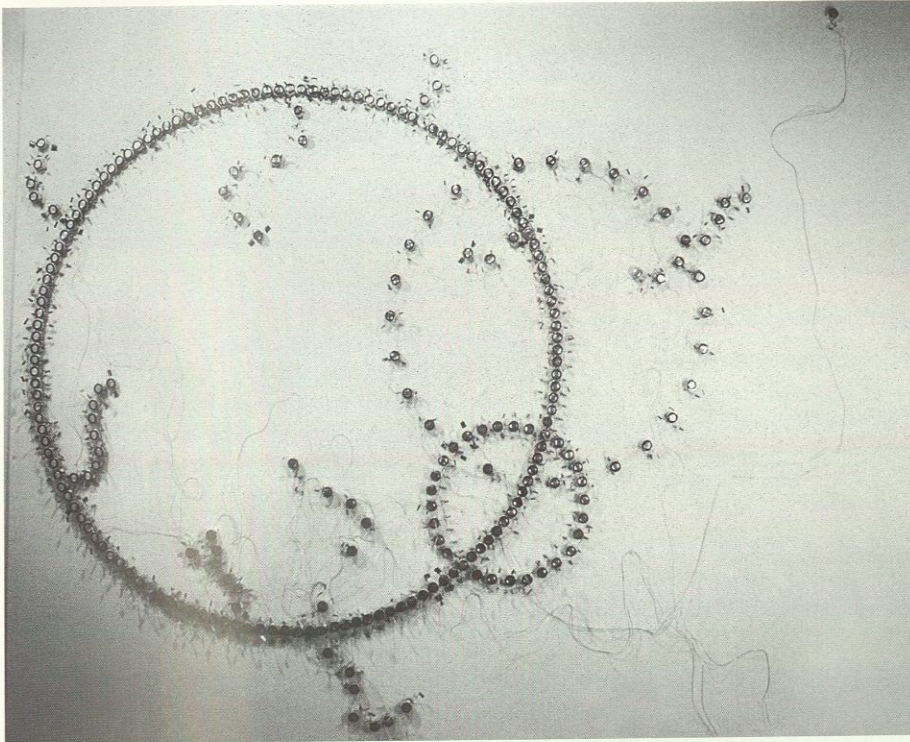
—Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 1914

wide relations. After her death, the same letters have illuminated her writings and the less visible forms of her cultural labor. Evans’s stamps, which conjure up the epistolary genre that occupied Stein’s time as a writer, seem an appropriate tribute to this author.

Stein’s novella *Many Many Women* is the source of a quotation Terry Berlier used in her sound sculpture *Human Tuning Fork #4* (or *World Tuning*), of 2004 (fig. 221). Berlier’s title asks auditor-viewers to imagine a sound-making mechanism that will “tune” human beings individually and collectively on a global scale. Berlier recontextualizes a passage from *Many Many Women* to address contemporary issues that resonate with Stein’s own modes of cultural production and transmission: personal relations, international networks, and spiritual kinship. The piece consists of 242 telephone speakers—one for every country in the world—configured, for the most part, as intersecting circles, like Stein’s looping prose.³ Berlier’s landline telephone seems only slightly less archaic than Evans’s postage stamp in this wireless era. But in Stein and Toklas’s day, the telephone was an ultramodern gadget. The most prevalent forms of rapid communication in early-twentieth-century Paris were the *petit bleu*, a letter shuttled to the addressee through a system of pneumatic tubes, and, for greater distances, the telegram. Stein and Toklas had a telephone installed at the rue de Fleurus apartment in the 1920s, at a time when few of their friends were equipped to receive a call. (The phone did not become ubiquitous in French homes until after the Second World War.) In this way, Stein could say what she had to say before most people had a way to hear it. Berlier’s piece materializes the cultural infrastructure that, once laid, enables her words to circulate boundlessly.

For *Human Tuning Fork #4*, Berlier wired together scores of miniature speakers (scavenged from telephone handsets) to form endless loops of transmission. The speakers broadcast Stein’s mantralike text (“anyone having been that one is the one that one is . . .”) in seven languages, playing on Stein’s repetitious use of the signifier “one,” which both individuates and universalizes the subject. The problem of translation is also central here: Does Stein’s text, already open to multiple interpretations in English, open further in translation? How is the pattern of her language modified when it crosses cultural and linguistic frontiers? Berlier’s sound sculpture frees Stein’s words from the printed page, affirming that hers is a living language, meant to be heard, spoken, repeated, reconfigured—and to generate new questions in new contexts.

Stein’s use of language has a different impact on Ed Ruscha’s work. In paintings such as *There’s a School There Because That’s Where the School Is* (2004) the artist simulates her cadences instead of quoting a text (fig. 222). Ruscha recalls the sound of Stein’s voice from his earliest years: “As a child I would hear my mother recite, ‘A rose is a rose is a rose’ almost like it was a radio pop tune or the 1950’s equivalent of ‘whatever.’ Later, I connected it to Gertrude Stein who was a poet in a far off place.”⁴ When he first read Stein’s “What Are Masterpieces,” Ruscha wondered if the omission of the question mark in the title might be a mistake. Stein’s apparent disrespect for the conventions of grammar and punctuation, the long paragraphs without periods or properly structured sentences, confounded him, he confesses. But at the same time, her writing “offered a strange brand of education to the world of literature. A stunning sample might be, ‘I have said and anybody can say anybody



221. Terry Berlier, *Human Tuning Fork #4 (World Tuning)*, 2004. Mixed-media sound sculpture, 243.8 × 243.8 × 2.5 cm (96 × 96 × 1 in.).

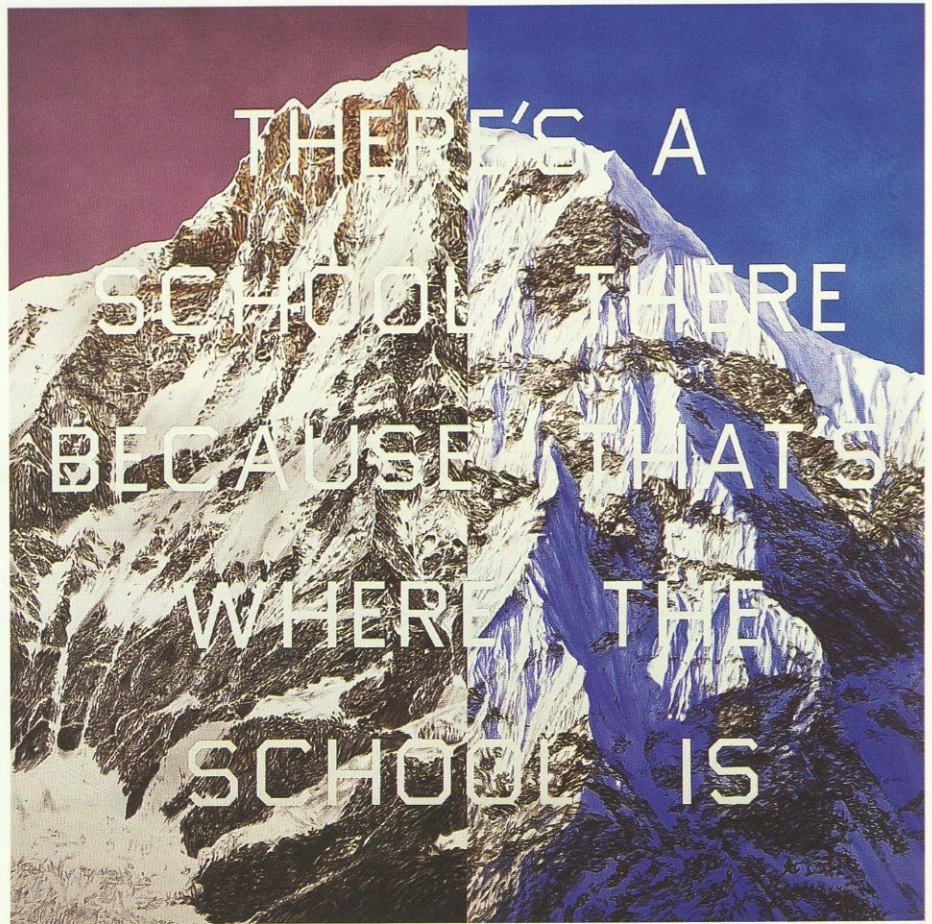
might say that knowledge is what you know.' She adopted the most radical approach to writing and thinking that I know of."⁴

Stein's approach to writing prompted Ruscha to seek an equivalent in painting by exploring disjunctions, both pictorial and textual. In the 1960s his use of this Steinian strategy evolved into a signature device that he has continued to elaborate. When he painted the phrase "There's a School There Because That's Where the School Is" in large letters on an alpine landscape, Ruscha explains, he combined and disoriented words in a way that "could easily have been thought of by her."⁵ Ruscha spliced together two generic views of snowy mountaintops, achieving the flat coolness associated with commercial art, complemented by the sans serif typography of the text. Against the artificiality of this "natural" backdrop, the signifier "school," suspended in an environment devoid of an appropriate visible referent, becomes an object itself, no more or less important than the other words with which it appears. The words and letters all receive equal emphasis. At the same time, the "things" represented, the mountain peaks, take on the properties of signage. Stein pioneered such strategies of introducing language, images, and objects from one realm into another to denaturalize them. Ruscha investigates the specifically visual implications of Stein's literary gambits. In paintings such as this one, he introduces visual clichés, repeated as variants that estrange them from their familiar field of associations. His work shows the dependence of images on conventional visual resemblance, habits of understanding whereby something as three-dimensional as a mountain can be rendered and recognized in two dimensions. These conventions attach the arbitrary icon or word redundantly to its referent; Stein's work, like Ruscha's, loosens these connections, dissolving literal meanings into poetic ones.

The painter Ellen Gallagher, using repetition similarly, has also applied lessons learned from Stein's writing in her painting practice. In works such as *Oh! Susanna* (the words

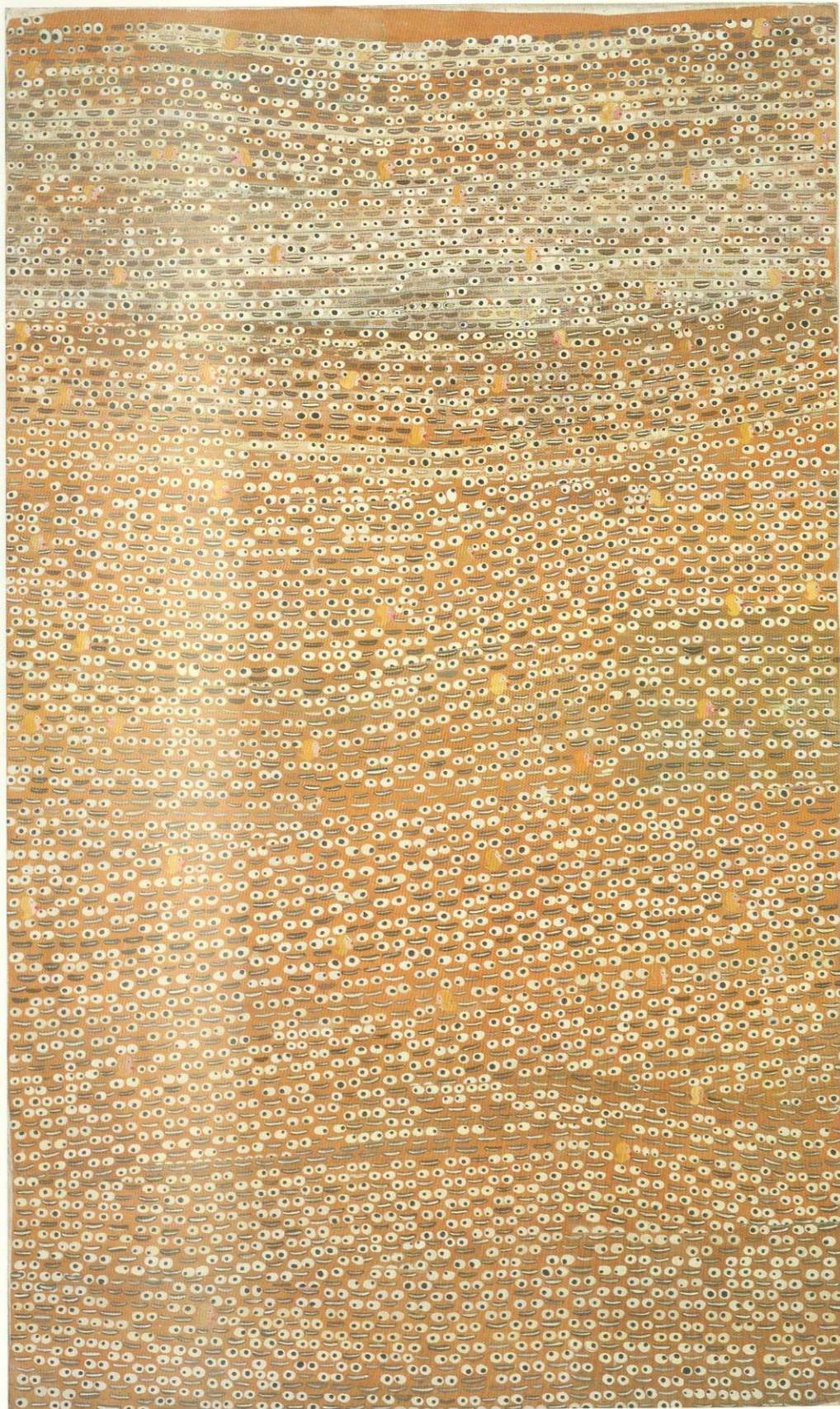
222. Edward Ruscha, *There's a School There Because That's Where the School Is*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 × 152.4 cm (60 × 60 in.).

223. Ellen Gallagher, *Oh! Susanna*, 1993. Oil, pencil, and paper mounted on canvas, 152.4 × 91.4 cm (60 × 36 in.).



of the title are those of a blackface minstrel song by Stephen Foster that was popular in the 1850s), Gallagher reiterates caricatural features of black physiognomy—sausage lips and saucer-wide eyes—to expose the mechanics of racial stereotyping and compromise the meaning of this particular racist trope (fig. 223). Gallagher's pictographs build, like aggregating cells, into abstract compositions of monumental scale. Only face-to-face examination brings the narrative content into focus. Pointing to Stein's use of language as paradigmatic, Gallagher explains, "It's like blues or hip-hop. You've got this original loop and then all these other rhythms that build off of it. So that anytime you come back to your loop it is always different, always displaced somehow even though it is the same beat or phrase."⁶ Gallagher abstracts and transforms the racist plotlines of popular culture into an antiracist non-narrative art form.

If Evans, Berlier, Ruscha, and Gallagher have all looked to Stein for useful models and motifs of visual practice, Glenn Ligon, who has based a series of sculptures on Stein's phrase "negro sunshine," takes a more ambivalent stance in relation to the author (fig. 224). Ligon—who appropriates culturally resonant images and texts to explore intersections of race, gender, and non-normative sexuality—lifted the phrase "negro sunshine" from Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha," a story, published in 1909, that was the longest of the three novellas in Stein's collection *Three Lives*, her first book-length publication. "Melanctha" chronicles the life of a mulatto woman in segregated Baltimore who searches for



"I love Gertrude Stein. In fact I write like Gertrude Stein, like somebody who wishes she could write like Gertrude Stein."

—Ellen Gallagher, *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making*, 2007

"Rose laughed when she was happy but had not the wide, abandoned laughter that makes the warm broad glow of negro sunshine."

—Gertrude Stein, "Melanctha," 1909

intellectual and emotional fulfillment. The story is exceptional in Stein's oeuvre because it features African American characters and simulates black rhythmic speech.

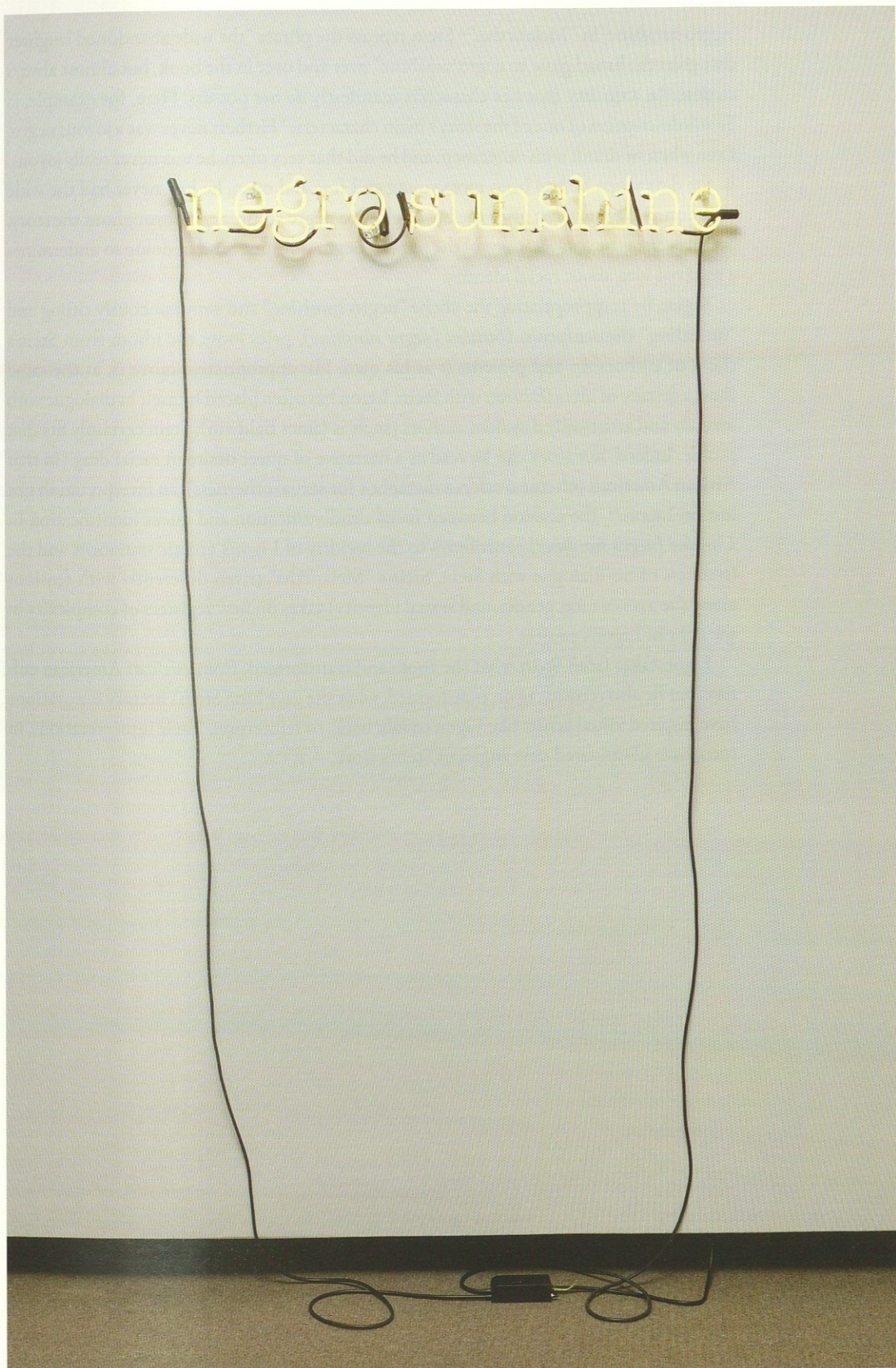
Among the works Ligon has created out of a recurrent phrase in this story, *Untitled (negro sunshine)* (2005) is exemplary. The words "negro sunshine," spelled out in the Lucida Bright typographic font, hang in the air, estranged from their literary and historical context in a way that Stein herself might have appreciated. The light cast by the sculpture's neon tubing is nocturnal and urban, whereas the title of the work suggests natural daytime. Ligon's use of neon deftly shifts the conceptual frame from nature to culture—evoking the urban nightspots of the Harlem Renaissance, where the New Negro emerged as a cultural and political force in the 1920s. In variants of the sculpture, Ligon has traced the neon lettering with an opaque compound called Plasti Dip, creating a disorienting effect of blacked-out writing haloed by oddly intensified white light. Matthew Guy Nichols refers to the blackening effect as "imitation minstrelsy," a formulation that might equally describe Stein's simulation of black vernacular in the story "Melanctha."⁷

When "Melanctha" was first released, the story was widely perceived as the first credible portrait of black life by a white author. Carl Van Vechten, an ardent proponent of the contemporary African American cultural renaissance, quoted whole passages of the story in his controversially titled best seller *Nigger Heaven* (1926), which introduced white society vicariously to the thrills of Harlem nightlife and also introduced new audiences to Gertrude Stein. "Melanctha" found sympathetic readers in France as well. The French surrealist author René Crevel requested Stein's permission to translate *Three Lives*.⁸ Many early-twentieth-century African American writers and critics also praised Stein's "Melanctha." W.E.B. Du Bois put Stein's *Three Lives* on a short list of the most noteworthy recent releases, in his column "What to Read," in *Crisis* (December 1910). James Weldon Johnson believed that Stein deserved credit for breaking the race barrier "to write a story of love between a Negro man and woman and deal with them as normal members of the human family."⁹ Nella Larson wrote to Stein, astonished that she had successfully "caught the spirit of this race of mine."¹⁰ Only a few dissented. Claude McKay, for one, reproached Stein for her simplistic views of racial identity. Despite the popularity of "Melanctha" among his peers, McKay confessed that he "could not see wherein intrinsically it was what it was cracked up to be."¹¹

As Werner Sollors argues in *Ethnic Modernism*, however, the author's penchant for repetition and for decontextualizing and recontextualizing ordinary language seems to have had the effect of negating rather than naturalizing the racist formulations that cycled through her work. "This," Sollors insists, "is the case with the repetition of the phrase

224. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (negro sunshine)*, 2005. Neon tubing with electrical wire and transformer, 13 × 108 × 6.4 cm (5 1/8 × 42 1/2 × 2 1/2 in.).

megrasunshine



'negro sunshine' in "Melanctha."¹² Stein repeats the phrase "the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to negro sunshine" over and over in the book, but almost always to describe a quality that her characters manifestly *do not* possess. Here, for example, is Stein's description of one of the story's main characters: "Herbert never was a joyous negro. Even when he drank with other men, and he did that very often, he was never really joyous. In the days when he had been most young and free and open, he had never had the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to negro sunshine."¹³ Throughout the story, Stein reverses the connotations of the phrase "negro sunshine" and in doing so undermines a received idea about racial identity.

Ligon, by reappropriating the cliché "negro sunshine" and simultaneously titling and "un-titling" the sculpture *Untitled (negro sunshine)*, pries loose the idiom from Stein's claim of authorship and presents it as his own. His appropriative move is, at the same time, a gesture of identification with Stein. Ligon has often placed himself in dialogue with sexually and artistically dissident authors (such as James Baldwin); Stein certainly fits that profile. Indeed, her story can be read as a narrative of queer desire in racial drag (in that African American otherness offers a metaphor for sexual otherness), an interpretation not lost on Ligon.¹⁴ The tension between racial disidentification and queer identification in *Untitled (negro sunshine)* contributes to the lucidity of Ligon's artistic statement and the liveliness of his dialogue with Stein. Stein's "Melanctha" (riven differently with tensions along the axes of race, gender, and sexual identity) takes on new registers of complexity in the light of Ligon's project.

Ligon takes from Stein what she took, and transformed, from African American culture, but he also returns, again transformed, what she gave him. Stein's literary innovations have inspired visual artists like Ligon to talk back, to reinterpret. Their interpretations, in turn, have illuminated new angles of Stein's work.—*T. T. L.*

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Gertrude Stein is justly famous for her patronage of vanguard painters (most notably Matisse and Picasso) in Paris before the First World War and for her innovative writing. *Seeing Gertrude Stein*, the companion book to the exhibition of the same name, illuminates less familiar aspects of her life, including the portraits for which Stein posed, the domestic settings she created with Alice B. Toklas, her partner, and the signature styles of dress the two women adopted. By focusing on portraits in a range of media, photo essays, press clippings, snapshots, clothing, furniture, and other visual artifacts, this pathbreaking study reveals Stein's sophistication in shaping her public image and cultural legacy.

"Innovative, fascinating, and far-reaching, *Seeing Gertrude Stein* is a brilliant and original investigation into the artistic and sexual self-fashioning of a writer perhaps best known for her role as a patron of artists. Corn and Latimer analyze images of Stein within a variety of contexts and reveal Stein and her lifelong partner, Alice B. Toklas, as they saw themselves and as active collaborators in shaping a unique iconography of femininity, lesbianism, and modernity for the twentieth century."

—**WHITNEY CHADWICK**, author of *Women, Art, and Society*

WANDA M. CORN, Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor Emerita in Art History at Stanford University, is the author of *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, and *Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition*, both from UC Press. **TIRZA TRUE LATIMER**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Graduate Program in Visual and Critical Studies at the California College of the Arts, is the author of *Women Together / Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris*.

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MUSEUM San Francisco

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS Berkeley 94704 www.ucpress.edu



An Ahmanson-Murphy
Fine Arts Book

Manufactured in Canada

ISBN 978-0-520-27002-2



Cover design: Lia Tjandra. Cover illustrations: *Front*: Man Ray, *Gertrude Stein Posing for Jo Davidson*, ca. 1923. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. © 2010 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS) / ADAGP, Paris. *Back*: Red Grooms, *Gertrude Stein*, 1975. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Kainen and museum purchase through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. © 2010 Red Grooms / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.